



2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings MT 59105

June 6, 2012

TO: Environmental Quality Council
Director's Office, Dept. of Environmental Quality
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*
 Director's Office
 Parks Division
 Fisheries Division
 Wildlife Division
 Lands Section
 Design & Construction
 Legal Unit
 Regional Supervisors
Mike Volesky, Governor's Office *
Sarah Elliott, Press Agent, Governor's Office*
Montana Historical Society, State Preservation Office
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montana State Library
George Ochenski
Montana Environmental Information Center
Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation
FWP Commissioner Shane Colton*
Montana Parks Association/Our Montana
Richard Moore, DNRC Area Manager, Southern Land Office
County Commissioners
Other Local Interested People or Groups
* (Sent electronically)

Ladies and gentlemen:

The enclosed draft Environmental Assessment describes a campground improvement project at Cooney State Park near Boyd, Montana. Proposed improvements include the addition of 15 to 23 double-occupancy and five to seven single-occupancy graveled campsites, group camping areas, gravel access roads, two vault latrines, electrical hook-ups, a well for irrigation, enlargement of the existing host pad, and landscaping. In addition, MSP proposes to develop a new non-motorized trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir. The proposed improvements of Cooney State Park would increase revenue and improve recreational opportunities by allowing additional opportunities for camping, boating, fishing, and hiking.

Questions and/or comment may be submitted until 5 p.m., July 6, 2012 and addressed to Jenny Alexander, 86 Lake Shore Drive, Roberts, MT 59070 or emailed to jalexander@mt.gov.

Sincerely,

Doug Habermann
Regional Parks Manager

Enclosure

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

COONEY STATE PARK PROPOSED CAMPGROUND IMPROVEMENTS



June 2012



Cooney State Park

**Proposed Improvement
Draft Environmental Assessment
MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST**

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Established as a state park in 1969, Cooney State Park is part of a statewide system consisting of 54 state parks and hosting two million visitors per year. Even though the use of Montana State Parks has steadily increased, funding and revenue for facilities improvements, maintenance, and public safety has not kept pace with the increased use and demand of state parks.

Cooney State Park hosts an average of 150,000 visitors per year and facilities are usually full every weekend during the peak season of Memorial Day to Labor Day. Overcrowding of campgrounds, day-use areas, and Cooney Reservoir has lead to increased visitor conflicts and resource damage. In addition, the demand for land-based, non-motorized recreational opportunities has also increased. Montana State Parks (MSP), a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife (FWP), proposes to improve campground facilities at Red Lodge Campground to enhance camping opportunities and increase park revenue.

Proposed improvements include the addition of 15 to 23 double-occupancy and five to seven single-occupancy graveled campsites, group camping areas, gravel access roads, two vault latrines, electrical hook-ups, a well for irrigation, enlargement of the existing host pad, and landscaping. In addition, MSP proposes to develop a new non-motorized trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir. The proposed improvements of Cooney State Park would increase revenue and improve recreational opportunities by allowing additional opportunities for camping, boating, fishing, and hiking.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

Section 23-1-110, MCA, and Administrative Rules of Montana (ARM) 12.2.433 guides public involvement and comment for the improvements at state park, which this document provides.

ARM 12.8.602 requires the Department to consider the wishes of the public, the capacity of the site for development, environmental impacts, long-range maintenance, protection of natural features and impacts on tourism as these elements relate to development or improvement to fishing access sites or state parks. This document will illuminate the facets of the proposed project in relation to this rule. See Appendix A for HB 495 qualification.

3. Name of project:

Cooney State Park Proposed Campground Improvements Project

4. Project sponsor:

Montana State Parks
2300 Lake Elmo Road
Billings, MT 59105
(406) 247-2940

5. Anticipated Schedule:

Estimated Public Comment Period: June 2012

Estimated Decision Notice: Summer 2012

Estimated Construction/Commencement Date: Winter 2013

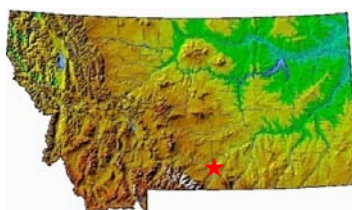
Estimated Completion Date: 2013

Current Status of Project Design (% complete): 5%

6. Location:

Cooney State Park is located on Cooney Reservoir, 35 miles southwest of Laurel and 25 mile south of Columbus on Cooney Dam Road in Carbon County (Figures 1 and 2). The Red Lodge Campground, the proposed project area, is located in the SW ¼ Section 35 and SE ¼ Section 34 Township 4 South Range 20 East.

Figure 1. Cooney State Park General Location.



7. Project size:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain (100 year)	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>10</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

8. Local, State or Federal agencies with overlapping or additional jurisdiction:

(a) Permits:

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Permit</u>
Montana DEQ	318 Stormwater Discharge Permit
Carbon County	Sanitation Permit
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks	124 MT Stream Protection Act
Montana Dept. of Environmental Quality	318 Short Term Water Quality Standard for Turbidity
	Stormwater Discharge Permit
US Army Corps of Engineers	404 Federal Clean Water Act

(b) Funding:

Parks Road Funds	\$100,000
Federal Wallop-Breaux	<u>\$ 50,000</u>
	\$150,000

(c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
Natural Heritage Program	Species of Concern (Appendix B)
State Historic Preservation Office	Cultural Clearance –to be requested once scope of work is determined
Carbon County Weed District	Weed Management Coordination and Approval of Weed Management Plan
Rock Creek Water Users Association	Dam and Water Storage Manager
Montana DNRC	Landowner and Lessor
Travel Montana	Tourism Report (Appendix C)

9. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

MSP proposes to improve campground and camp-host facilities at Red Lodge Campground to improve the recreational experience for visitors.

In addition, MSP proposes to develop a new trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir in the future. The trail surface would be composed of compacted soil and would accommodate all non-motorized uses. Funding sources described for the campground would not be used for the trail, other funding sources would be sought for that purpose. Funding for this trail project is not currently available.

Operation and management of the proposed improvements includes managing visitor use and maintaining facilities. Protection of the natural resources, the health and safety of visitors, and consideration of neighboring properties would all be considered and incorporated into development plans for this site. Development of additional campsites, latrines, landscaping, and the North Shore Trail would enhance visitor use of the park as well as provide long-term protection of the resource.

The proposed improvements at Cooney State Park would increase revenue and improve recreational opportunities by providing additional opportunities for camping and hiking.

In 1937, the Public Works Administration and State Water Conservation Board built Cooney Dam, named for Governor Frank Cooney, at the confluence of Red Lodge Creek, Willow Creek, and Chapman Creek for irrigation purposes. In 1969, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) leased 293 acres to the State Parks Division of the Fish and Game Department (now FWP) for the purpose of providing public recreational use of Cooney Reservoir and establishing a state park. The land managed for recreational purposes includes 15.7 acres owned in fee title by FWP and 293 acres leased from DNRC, for a total of 309 acres (Figure 5). This lease was renewed in 2006 for a 10-year period

Located in the foothills of the Beartooth Mountains of south-central Montana, Cooney State Park has become one of the most popular state parks in Montana, with approximately 150,000 visitors annually. Its popularity is due in part to the park providing the largest water body for water-based recreation within 50 miles of Billings and to its proximity to Red Lodge (20 miles south), Yellowstone National Park (85 miles southwest) and the scenic Beartooth Mountains. Facilities at Cooney State Park include: five campgrounds with a total of 72 campsites, six day-use areas, three boat ramps, 12 vault latrines, a comfort station, and a fish cleaning station (Figure 4). The mission of the park is to provide easy and safe public access to water- and land-based recreation by providing quality and well-

maintained facilities; friendly, responsive and helpful service; resource management; and collaborative partnerships.

Lands surrounding the park are owned and managed by DNRC or private individuals. Because parkland is not contiguous around the reservoir, the ability to expand recreational facilities or programs is limited. In addition, the Rock Creek Water Users Association manages the dam and water storage of Cooney Reservoir primarily for irrigation. The Association retains the right to maintain, operate, and control the reservoir levels, with an active storage capacity of 28,400 acre-feet on 1,078 surface acres. Water levels can fluctuate and are influenced by the efficiency of the delivery systems, irrigation needs, temperatures, precipitation, time of year, and water rights.

Figure 4. Cooney State Park Map.



Cooney State Park is part of a statewide park system consisting of 54 state parks and hosting two million visitors in 2010, up 50 percent from 2002. Total spending of both resident and nonresident visitors to Montana State Parks was over \$289 million, up 35 percent from 2002. The *2010 Economic Impact Survey of Visitors to Montana State Parks* concluded that Montana State Parks represent an invaluable resource for the economy of Montana and will continue to play an important role in the economic health of the state. Even though the use of Montana State Parks has steadily increased, funding and revenue for facilities improvements, maintenance, and patrol has not kept pace with the increased use and demand of state parks.

Cooney State Park has consistently been one of the top visited state parks in Montana. Based upon results of the *2006 Cooney State Park Visitors Survey*, annual visitation during 2007 - 2011 ranged from 132,000 visitors in 2008 and 156,000 visitors in 2007, and averaged 147,000 visitors. 95 percent of visitors to Cooney State Park were Montana residents. This survey demonstrated that the majority of visitors to Cooney State Park were local residents of Montana, most likely the Billings region, and frequently returned throughout the year.

The high visitation requires managing visitor numbers both on the water and in the campgrounds and day use areas. Overcrowding in campgrounds and day-use areas has lead to increased visitor conflicts and resource damage. Overcrowding at Red Lodge Campground has resulted in single-occupancy sites being used by several recreational vehicles (RV), damaging vegetation surrounding the campsites and campground. Overcrowding has also lead to conflicts between visitors in the campgrounds and on the water.

Over 70 percent of visitors to Cooney State Park participate in water-based recreation, including boating (70%), fishing (59%), swimming (56%), water skiing (27%), and personal watercraft (18%). Because approximately 80 percent of vehicles bring a boat to the park, it is possible that the increased capacity at Red Lodge Campground could lead to a higher number of boats on the water, leading to a higher incidence of public safety issues. Even though public use regulations for the reservoir are in place, public safety issues have continued. In order to address visitor concerns relating to overcrowding of boats and personal watercraft, a public safety initiative was implemented in the summer of 2011 that included the establishment of a full time commissioned peace officer/Park Warden position stationed at Cooney State Park. This year-round position provides an enhanced public safety law enforcement and emergency response presence in the park.

The continued popularity of the park, coupled with increased visitor demand, has made it desirable to add new facilities and adjust operational procedures to reflect the increasing visitation levels. The *2012 Cooney State Park Management Plan* lists "Improving camping opportunities and facilities for visitors", "Developing additional camping opportunities at the park", and "Planting more trees in key use areas" as Priority 1 Objectives. "Improving volunteer camp host facilities", "Creating additional revenue sources", and "Building and maintaining a trail around the reservoir to expand land-based non-motorized opportunities" are also listed as priority objectives in the *2012 Cooney State Park Management Plan*.

The Reservation System was initiated in 2011. Cooney has 75% of it's sites on the Reservation system making it even easier for folks to have a camping site ready and waiting for them. Overall visitors were glad to see MSP implement a reservation system.

They like knowing they don't have to compete with the crowds for a site; that a site is waiting for them when they arrive at the park.

In the *2006 Cooney State Park Visitors Survey* 50% of visitors surveyed wanted additional group camping opportunities. The proposed Alternatives B and C would provide additional group camping opportunities for visitors coming to the park.

Alternative B and C will also include additional tent only campsites providing tent campers the availability to camp closer to the lake.

Figure 3. Alternative B - Cooney State Park Red Lodge Campground Proposed Concept Plan.



Figure 4. Alternative C - Cooney State Park Red Lodge Campground Proposed Concept Plan.

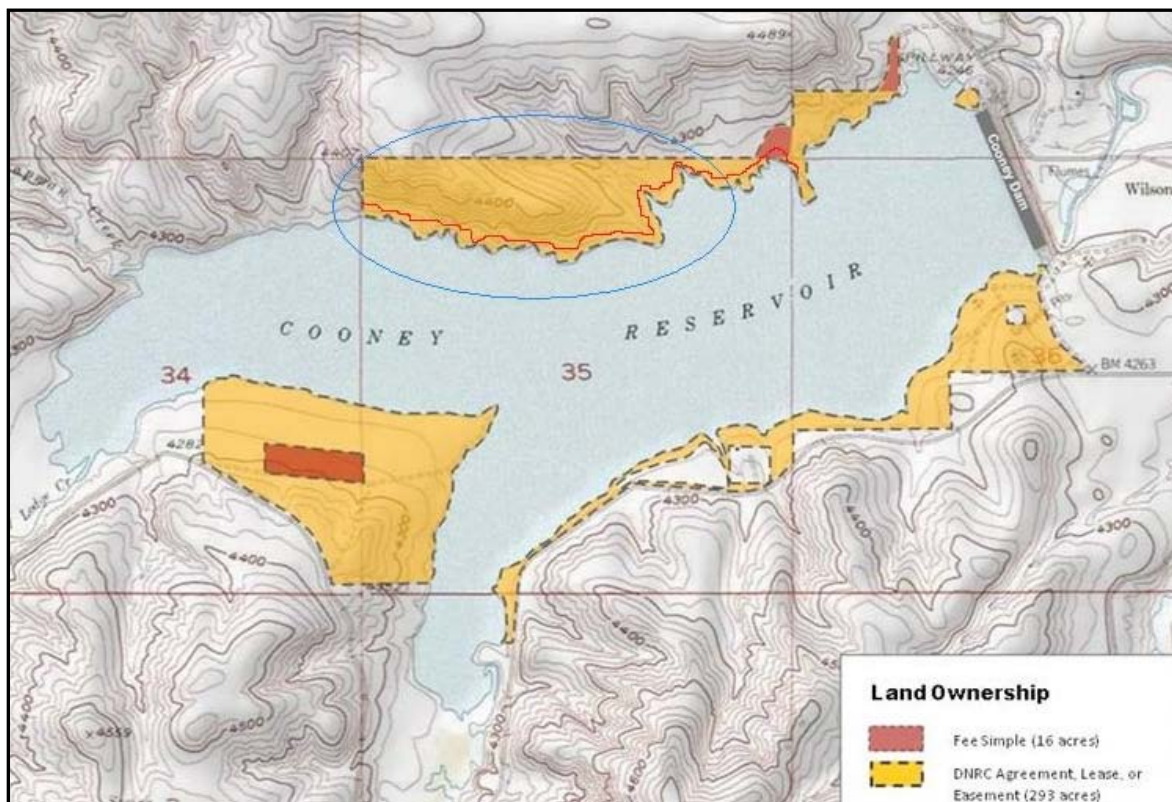


Figure 5. Lands leased by FWP from DNRC for State Park purposes. Proposed North Shore trail location circled and shown by thin line.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

No action would result in continued campground overcrowding, visitor conflicts, and environmental damage of the site would continue. Additional revenue would not be available to implement goals from the *2012 Cooney State Park Management Plan*, would be limited. Expanding land-based non-motorized recreational opportunities would be limited without development of the North Shore Trail.

Alternative B: Addition of 30 Campsites and Associated Facilities.

The *2012 Cooney State Park Management Plan* outlines goals to 1) Improve and diversify camping opportunities and facilities for visitors; 2) Increase revenue from Montana State Parks; 3) Improve Volunteer camp-host facilities; and 4) Increase tree plantings and landscape plantings. MSP proposes to address these goals by increasing the campsite capacity at the Red Lodge Campground. Alternative B (Figure 3) would include: construction of a new camp spur and 15 double-occupancy pull-through and back-in campsites; construction of two circular, large group camping areas with four double-occupancy back-in campsites each; extension of the existing spur adding seven tent campsites; widening of the existing host pad to accommodate a second camp-host; landscaping and tree planting; well drilling for irrigation/drinking water purposes. Under Alternative B, 30 campsites would be added and all new double-occupancy campsites would have electrical hook-ups. The *2012 Cooney State Park Management Plan* also outlines the goal of building and maintaining a trail around the reservoir to expand land-based non-motorized recreational opportunities and to connect major park use areas. MSP also proposes to construct a trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir (Figure 5) in order to address this goal.

Alternative C: Addition of 20 Campsites and Associated Facilities.

The only differences between Alternative B and C are the number and type of campsites added. Alternative C would include construction of a new camp spur and 7 pull-through double-occupancy campsites; construction of two circular spurs to accommodate group camping with four double-occupancy back-in campsites each; and extension of the existing spur adding five tent campsites (Figure 4). Under Alternative C, 20 campsites would be added and all new double-occupancy sites would have electrical hook-ups.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures

enforceable by the agency or another government agency: MSP would maintain and manage the facilities as a State Park and the property would be open to public use year round. Operations and maintenance funding would continue from MSP funding sources. The MSP Design and Construction Section engineering staff have designed the proposed site plan. A private contractor, required to meet all state standards and specifications, will complete construction of the project. The Design and Construction Section will oversee the project and is responsible for final inspection. All permits will be the responsibility of MSP or the contractor through MSP.

PART III. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				1a.
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		Yes	1b.
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				1c.
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?			X		Yes	1d.
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X			.	

- 1a/1b. The soils on the proposed project area in the Red Lodge Campground are primarily clay loam with gentle 2 to 4 percent slopes, low moisture holding capacity, and only slight erosion hazard. The site is also rated as somewhat limited for campground use due to slow water movement through the soil. Soils along the north shore are primarily clay loam with hilly (15 – 25 percent) to steep (25 – 45 percent) slopes. The proposed campground and North Shore Trail development would not affect existing soil patterns, structures, productivity, fertility, erosion, compaction, or instability. Soil and geologic substructure would remain stable during and after the proposed work.
- 1b. Construction of campsite pads and access roads would disrupt, displace, and compact soils in the immediate vicinity of construction. Disturbed areas not covered by roads or campsite pads would be seeded with a native seed mix to reduce erosion and the spread of noxious weeds.
- 1c. No unique geologic or physical features would be altered by the proposed project.
- 1d. The proposed project would have no impacts on the bed or shore of Cooney Reservoir. Minor amounts of sediment may enter the reservoir during construction of the access roads and campsites. However, upon completion, erosion and reservoir sedimentation as a result of construction would end. In fact, reduction of campground overcrowding could reduce resource degradation and sedimentation in to the reservoir. MSP would follow the best management practices (BMP) during all phases of construction to minimize risks and reduce dust.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)			X		Yes	2a.
b. Creation of objectionable odors?			X		Yes	2b.
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. ***For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				2e.

- 2a. During construction, temporary amounts of dust may be generated during leveling and grading of access roads, construction of campsites, and development of the North Shore Trail. If additional materials are needed off-site, loading at the source site would generate minor amounts of dust. MSP would follow BMP during all phases of construction to minimize risks and reduce dust. Development of the proposed project would draw additional recreationists to the Red Lodge Campground, which could increase the amount of dust on Red Lodge Creek Road and Lake Shore Road. If increased recreational traffic causes a significant dust problem, MSP would explore working with Carbon County to apply a dust-retardant to reduce the deleterious effects.

Diesel equipment would be used during construction, causing a temporary increase in diesel exhaust. If the proposed development were implemented, odors from diesel exhaust would dissipate rapidly and the impacts would be short term and minor.

- 2b. All vault latrines will be regularly maintained to minimize objectionable odors.

- 2e. The proposed project would not result in discharges that would conflict with federal or state air quality regulations.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?			X		Yes	3a.
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?			X		Yes	3b.
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				3d.
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?			X			
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?			X			
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?			X		Yes	3h.
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				3l.
m. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				3m.

3a/3m. Construction of new access roads, campsites, and North Shore Trail may cause a temporary, localized increase in turbidity in Cooney Reservoir. MSP will obtain a Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) 318 Authorization Permit for Short Term Water Quality Standard for Turbidity if necessary and follow the permit requirements. Any impacts due to construction would be temporary and minor.

3b. Construction of new access roads, campsites, and the North Shore Trail may alter surface runoff. The proposed development would be designed to minimize any effect on surface water, surface runoff, and drainage patterns.

3d. There may be a minor, temporary increase of runoff during construction.

3f/3g. Drilling of wells for irrigation and/or drinking water may have a very limited, localized impact on quality or quantity of groundwater. Since the proposed improvement would be immediately adjacent to the Reservoir, it would be downstream and remote from any other groundwater uses.

3h. The use of heavy equipment during construction may result in a slight risk of contamination from petroleum products and an increase in sediment delivery to the reservoir.

- 3l. The Carbon County Floodplain Administrator confirmed on April 30, 2012 that the Red Lodge Campground and the North Shore of Cooney State Park are not located within a designated floodplain.
- 3m. All impacts to water quality would be temporary resulting from construction.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X		Yes	4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X		Yes	4b.
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				4c.
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				4d.
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Yes	4e.
f. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				

- 4a./4b. Construction of the access roads, campsites, and North Shore Trail would have a minor impact on the vegetation, removing existing vegetation in the area of construction and altering the diversity of plant communities on the construction sites. No trees or shrubs would be removed during construction of the access roads and campsites and removal of trees and shrubs during construction of the North Shore Trail would be minimized. Because the construction area is small, impacts from construction would be minor. By grading the access roads, covering areas prone to erosion with erosion fabric, and seeding eroded areas with native species, plant communities affected by construction would reestablish.
- 4c. A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program's (MNHP) Species of Concern database found that no plant Species of Concern have been reported within 2 miles of the proposed project areas.
- 4d. Livestock grazing is not allowed within the boundaries of Cooney State Park.
- 4e. Noxious weeds are found at Cooney State Park and soils disturbed during construction could colonize with weeds. Disturbed areas would be re-seeded with a native reclamation seed mix where necessary to reduce the establishment of weeds. In conjunction with the Carbon County Weed Control District, MSP would continue implementing the Statewide Integrated Weed Management Plan using chemical, biological and mechanical methods to control weeds on the property. Weed management would include the establishment of native vegetation to prevent the spread of weeds. Vehicles would be restricted to the parking area and access road, which would be maintained as weed-free, and vehicles would not be allowed on undisturbed areas of the site to minimize the spread of noxious weeds.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				5a.
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X		Yes	5b.
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				5c.
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				5f.
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?		X				5g.
h. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				5h.
i. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				5i.

5a,b,c. Based on a review of the Montana Natural Heritage Program, common wildlife species whose habitat distribution overlaps Cooney State Park include white-tailed deer, mule deer, pronghorn, mountain lion, bobcat, badger, red fox, golden eagle, red-tail hawk, great-horned owl, sand hill crane, and waterfowl. A wide variety of resident and migratory birds seasonally use the area, including Canada geese, ducks, and numerous songbirds. The site also provides habitat for raptors, including hawks and bald eagle.. The proposed project will have no impact on any critical fish or wildlife habitat and will have no impact on the diversity or abundance of game animals, bird species, or non-game species.

FWP annually stocks Cooney Reservoir with rainbow trout and/or Yellowstone cutthroat trout. Species considered common in the reservoir include Yellowstone cutthroat trout, brown trout, burbot, walleye, black crappie, lake chub, and long nose sucker. According to surveys by FWP, the number of angler days per year from 2001 to 2009 at Cooney Reservoir averaged 19,250, with a low of 11,850 in 2007 to high of 29,093 in 2009. The state ranking for angling pressure for the reservoir averaged 37 and ranged from 28 in 2009 to 47 in 2007 for this same period. Cooney Reservoir ranked as high as 2 for angling pressure in FWP Region 5 in 2009, only behind the Big Horn River. Approximately 96 percent of the angler use is from Montana residents.

The development of additional camping facilities at Red Lodge Campground would most likely lead to increased angler use. Fish populations would continue to be monitored by FWP and, if necessary, stocking rates and fishing regulations could also be adjusted to maintain a healthy fishery.

- 5f. The Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) and FWP biologists were contacted regarding impacts to Threatened and Endangered (TE) Species or their critical habitat in the vicinity of Cooney State Park. A search of the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) database revealed that no animal or plant Species of Concern has been observed or recorded in the vicinity of Cooney State Park.
- 5g. The site has been previously disturbed with five campgrounds, day-use areas, boat launching facilities, access roads, and parking areas. The proposed developments of the Red Lodge Campground and the North Shore Trail would not contribute to additional disturbance of the area and would have no permanent, detrimental impact on existing wildlife or wildlife habitat. In addition, the area is not considered critical wildlife habitat for any species.
- The improved facilities could lead to increased use by anglers, which could increase stress on fish populations in Cooney Reservoir. If impacts were observed, those could be mitigated by modifications of fishing regulations and stocking by FWP.
- 5h. No threatened or endangered species as classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have been recorded in the vicinity of Cooney State Park.
- 5i. No wildlife species would be imported or exported to the area as a result of the proposed development. This project only involves campground improvements and will not promote the introduction or spread of invasive species.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X			6a.
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?			X		Yes	6b.
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

6a. Construction equipment would cause a temporary, minor increase in noise levels at the site. Any increase in noise level at the construction site would be short term and minor.

6b. 50 residences located above Cooney Reservoir's north shore are within 1 mile of Red Lodge Campground and within .5 miles of the proposed North Shore trail. The minor and temporary increased noise levels during construction may disturb some visitors and residents.

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?			X		Yes Positive	7a.
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

7a. MSP does not lease any portion of the park for livestock grazing and there are no plans to allow livestock grazing in the future. No portions of the park have been in agricultural production since the park was established in 1969.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor*	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?			X		Yes	8a.
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X		Yes	8c.
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)			X		Yes	8d.

- 8a. Physical disturbance of the soil during construction may encourage the establishment of additional noxious weeds on the site. In conjunction with the Carbon County Weed District, MSP will continue implementing an integrated approach to control noxious weeds, as outlined in the FWP Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan. The integrated plan uses a combination of biological, mechanical and herbicidal treatments to control noxious weeds. The use of herbicides would be in compliance with application guidelines to minimize the risk of chemical spills or water contamination and applied by people trained in safe handling techniques.

Petroleum products used by the equipment during construction pose a low risk. No defective equipment would be operated in the project area or in any area capable of reaching surface water. Refueling of equipment would occur in areas designed to minimize impacts if spills or accidents occur.

- 8c. Over 70 percent of visitors to Cooney State Park participate in water-based recreation, including boating (70%), fishing (59%), swimming (56%), water skiing (27%), and personal watercraft (18%). On weekends during the peak season, as many as 75 boats have been counted on the water at one time, which is considered the maximum capacity of the reservoir. Because approximately 80 percent of vehicles bring a boat to the park, it is possible that the increased capacity at Red Lodge Campground could lead to a higher number of boats on the water, leading to a higher incidence of public safety issues. A public safety initiative was implemented in the summer of 2011 that included the establishment of a full time commissioned peace officer/Park Warden position stationed at Cooney State Park. This position provides professional emergency response capabilities and has the authority to enforce park rules and regulations. In order to address potential visitor conflicts resulting from an increased number of boats and personal watercraft, the Park Warden would patrol the water more frequently, especially during the peak season, and conduct safety education programs in the park.
- 8d. The use of herbicides to control noxious weeds that colonized disturbed areas after construction could result in temporary water contamination from an inadvertent spill. The use of herbicides would be in compliance with application guidelines, as outlined in the FWP Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan, to minimize this risk and would be applied by people trained in safe handling techniques.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u>						
	Will the proposed action result in:	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated * Comment Index
	a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X			
	b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X			
	c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?			X		Yes Positive 9c.
	d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X			
	e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?			X		9e.

- 9c. The proposed project is likely to improve tourism by increasing the number of visitors to the Columbus, Laurel, Joliet, and Red Lodge areas due to the improved facilities. This would benefit local retail and service businesses at current or slightly increased levels (Appendix C - Tourism Report).
- 9e. The proposed development could increase vehicle trips per day through Columbus, Laurel, Joliet, and Red Lodge and could slightly increase traffic and traffic hazards in these communities and along Highways 212 and 78, Shane Creek Road, and Cooney Dam Road Road. Any impacts to traffic would be minor.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources		X				10e.
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.		X				10 f.

10e. The proposed development would be funded from Parks Roads Fund and the federal Wallop-Breaux. The annual revenue from camping fees for fiscal year 2010 was \$57,124. With the addition of designated campsites, future revenues from camping are anticipated to increase by approximately \$38,000 with Alternative B, and \$25,000 with Alternative C. Maintenance expenses for latrine cleaning and pumping, mowing, weeding, cleaning fire pits, and litter removal would be correspondingly higher.

10f. Projected annual operating, maintenance, and personnel expenses for fiscal year 2012 will be approximately \$242,505, which includes noxious weed control.

** 11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X		Yes Positive	11a.
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				11b.
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)			X		Yes Positive	11c.
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				

- 11a. Cooney State Park is operated for day use and camping. The proposed project would include improvement of designated campsites, parking areas and the North Shore Trail. The proposed developments would be visible from the reservoir, the residential subdivision on the north shore and partially from Lake Shore Road.
- 11b. The site is already developed so the proposed improvement of additional camping facilities and a walking trail would not detract from the scenic values of the park or surrounding area.
- 11c. The proposed improvement would provide safe public overnight camping opportunities for the Columbus, Laurel, and Red Lodge and greater Billings areas. In addition, the proposed development would allow for continued public recreational use of Cooney State Park.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources?		X				

FWP will perform a cultural resources survey once scope of work, if any, is determined, and notify the State Historic Preservation Office for concurrence.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown *	None	Minor *	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated *	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. ***For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. ****For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

During construction of the proposed improvements, there may be minor and temporary impacts to the physical environment, but the impacts would be short-term and the improvements would benefit the community and recreational opportunities over the long-term. The proposed improvements would have no negative cumulative effects on the biological, physical, and human environments. When considered over the long-term, the proposed improvements positively impact the public's recreational use of Cooney State Park, a very popular and heavily used recreational area.

The minor impacts to the environment that were identified in the previous section are small in scale and would not influence the overall environment of the immediate area. The natural environment would continue to provide habitat to transient and permanent wildlife species and would be open to the public for access to Cooney Reservoir. The proposed improvements of Cooney State Park would reduce erosion and degradation to water quality, and reduce degradation of riparian and upland habitats from pioneered camping.

Noxious weeds are found at Cooney State Park. Areas disturbed during construction would be re-seeded with a native reclamation seed mix where necessary to reduce the establishment of weeds. In conjunction with Carbon County Weed Control District, MSP would continue implementing the

FWP Statewide Integrated Weed Management Plan using chemical, biological, and mechanical methods to control weeds resulting from the proposed project.

The proposed improvements would not affect the local wildlife species that frequent the property and would not increase conditions that stress wildlife populations. The property is not considered critical habitat for any species and the proposed improvements are unlikely to affect wildlife since there is already substantial activity and disturbance in the area from recreational activities and irrigation use.

The improvement of additional campsites and camping facilities at the Red Lodge Campground of Cooney State Park would lead to increased angler use. Periodic monitoring of fish populations in the reservoir by FWP would be necessary to maintain a healthy fishery.

It is possible that the increased capacity at Red Lodge Campground could lead to a higher number of boats and personal watercraft on the water and to a higher incidence of public safety issues. In order to address possible visitor conflicts resulting from an increased number of boats and personal watercraft, the Park Warden would patrol the reservoir more frequently, especially during the peak season, and conduct safety education programs in the park. The Park Warden would also have the authority to issue citations for violations of the Cooney Reservoir Rules and Regulations.

With the proposed addition of designated campsites, future revenues from camping are anticipated to increase by approximately \$38,000 with Alternative B and \$25,000 with Alternative C. Maintenance expenses for latrine cleaning and pumping, mowing, weeding, cleaning fire pits, and litter removal would be correspondingly higher.

The proposed improvement would increase park revenue, reduce campground overcrowding, visitor conflicts, and resource damage, and would improve recreational opportunities by allowing additional opportunities for camping, boating, fishing, hiking, picnicking, and wildlife viewing at the very popular Cooney State Park.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manner to comment on the Cooney State Park Proposed Improvement Project:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: the *Billings Gazette*, *Carbon County News*, and the *Helena Independent Record*.
- Public notice on the Montana web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.
- Draft EA's will be available at the FWP Region 5 Headquarters in Billings.
- A news release will be prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 5 issues.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

If requested within the comment period, MSP will schedule and conduct a public meeting on this proposed project.

2. Duration of comment period.

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days following the publication of the second legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., July 6, 2012 and can be e-mailed to jalexander@mt.gov or mailed to the address below:

Cooney State Park Proposed Improvement Project
Cooney State park
86 Lake Shore Road
Roberts, MT 59070

PART V. EA PREPARATION

**1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? NO
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment under MEPA, this environmental review revealed no significant negative impacts from the proposed action: therefore, an EIS is not necessary and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis. In determining the significance of the impacts, MSP assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. MSP assessed the growth-inducing or growth-inhibiting aspects of the impact, the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value effected, any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit MSP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws. As this EA revealed no significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

2. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:

Jennifer Alexander
Cooney State Park Manager
86 Lake Shore Dr
Roberts, MT 59070
jalexander@mt.gov
(406) 445-2326

Andrea Darling
MSP EA Contractor
39 Big Dipper Drive
Montana City, MT 59634
apdarling@gmail.com

3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

Carbon County Floodplain Administrator
Montana Department of Commerce – Tourism
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
 Director's Office
 Legal Unit
 Parks Division
 Park Operations Bureau
 Design and Construction Section
 Fish and Wildlife Division
 Fisheries Bureau
 Wildlife Bureau
Montana Natural Heritage Program – Natural Resources Information System (NRIS)

APPENDICES

- A. MCA 23-1-110 Qualification Checklist
- B. Native Species Report - Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP)
- C. Tourism Report – Department of Commerce

APPENDIX A

23-1-110 MCA PROJECT QUALIFICATION CHECKLIST

Date: May, 2012

Person Reviewing: Andrea Darling

Project Location: Cooney State Park is located on Cooney Reservoir, 35 miles southwest of Laurel and 25 mile south of Columbus in Carbon County. The Red Lodge Campground is located in the SW ¼ Section 35 and SE ¼ Section 34 Township 4 South Range 20 East.

Description of Proposed Work: MSP proposes to expand and improve campground facilities at Red Lodge Campground to increase park revenue and alleviate overcrowding. Proposed developments include: the addition of 15 to 23 double-occupancy and five to seven single-occupancy graveled campsites, large group facilities, gravel access roads, two vault latrines, electrical hook-ups, a well for irrigation, enlargement of the existing host pad, and landscaping. In addition, MSP proposes to develop a new non-motorized trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir.

The following checklist is intended to be a guide for determining whether a proposed development or improvement is of enough significance to fall under 23-1-110 rules. (Please check all that apply and comment as necessary.)

- ☒ **A. New roadway or trail built over undisturbed land?**
Comments: The new campsites and associate access road and North Shore Trail would be built over undisturbed land.
- ☐ **B. New building construction (buildings <100 sf and vault latrines exempt)?**
Comments: No buildings will be constructed.
- ☒ **C. Any excavation of 20 c.y. or greater?**
Comments: Yes, for road, campsite, and trail construction.
- ☐ **D. New parking lots built over undisturbed land or expansion of existing lot that increases parking capacity by 25% or more?**
Comments: The existing parking area would not be expanded.
- ☐ **E. Any new shoreline alteration that exceeds a doublewide boat ramp or handicapped fishing station?**
Comments: There would be no shoreline alteration
- ☐ **F. Any new construction into lakes, reservoirs, or streams?**
Comments: There will be no construction into the reservoir.
- ☐ **G. Any new construction in an area with National Registry quality cultural artifacts (as determined by State Historical Preservation Office)?**
Comments: No.
- ☐ **H. Any new above ground utility lines?**
Comments: No new utility lines. New electric hook-ups would use existing utility lines.
- ☒ **I. Any increase or decrease in campsites of 25% or more of an existing number of campsites?**
Comments: There are approximately 27 existing designated campsites. 20 to 30 additional campsites would be developed at Red Lodge Campground.
- ☒ **J. Proposed project significantly changes the existing features or use pattern; including effects of a series of individual projects?**
Comments: The construction campsites and other campground facilities and the North Shore Trail would change the existing use pattern of the area.

If any of the above is checked, 23-1-110 MCA rules apply to this proposed work and should be documented on the MEPA/HB495 CHECKLIST.
Refer to MEPA/HB495 Cross Reference Summary for further assistance.

APPENDIX B
NATIVE SPECIES REPORT
MONTANA NATURAL HERITAGE PROGRAM
Sensitive Plants and Animals in the Vicinity of Cooney State Park

Species of Concern Terms and Definitions

A search of the Natural Resources Information System (NRIS) provided by the Montana Natural Heritage Program showed that there are no records of species of special concern for the vicinity of Cooney State Park. See MNHP letter attached below.



P.O. Box 201800 • 1515 East Sixth Avenue • Helena, MT 59620-1800 • fax 406.444.0581 • tel 406.444.5354 •
<http://mtnhp.org>

April 19, 2012

Andrea Darling
FWP Environmental Assessment Contractor
MT FWP
39 Big Dipper Drive
Clancy, Montana 59634

Dear Andrea,

I am writing in response to your recent request regarding species of concern in the vicinity of the Cooney State Park Proposed Improvement, in Sections 34 and 35, T04S, R20E, in Carbon County.

In checking our database for this area, I found no records of species of special concern. A map is enclosed so you can confirm that the search area is correct.

The results of a data search by the Montana Natural Heritage Program reflect the current status of our data collection efforts. These results are not intended as a final statement on sensitive species within a given area, or as a substitute for on-site surveys, which may be required for environmental assessments. The information is intended for project screening only with respect to species of concern, and not as a determination of environmental impacts, which should be gained in consultation with appropriate agencies and authorities.

Should you have any questions or require additional information, please feel free to contact me at (406) 444-3290 or via my e-mail address below.

Sincerely,

Martin P. Miller
Montana Natural Heritage Program
martinm@mt.gov

APPENDIX C
TOURISM REPORT
MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) & MCA 23-1-110

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has initiated the review process as mandated by MCA 23-1-110 and the Montana Environmental Policy Act in its consideration of the project described below. As part of the review process, input and comments are being solicited. Please complete the project name and project description portions and submit this form to:

Carol Crockett, Visitor Services Manager
Travel Montana-Department of Commerce
301 S. Park Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

Project Name: Cooney State Park Proposed Improvement Project

Project Description: Established as a state park in 1969, Cooney State Park is part of a statewide park system consisting of 54 state parks and hosting two million visitors per year. Even though the use of Montana State Parks has steadily increased, funding and revenue for facilities improvements, maintenance, and patrol has not kept pace with the increased use and demand of state parks. Cooney State Park hosts an average of 150,000 visitors per year and facilities are usually full every weekend during the peak season of Memorial Day to Labor Day. Overcrowding of campgrounds, day-use areas, and Cooney Reservoir has lead to increased visitor conflicts and resource damage. In addition, the demand for land-based, non-motorized recreational opportunities has also increased. Montana State Parks (MSP), a division of Montana Fish, Wildlife (FWP), proposes to expand and improve campground facilities at Red Lodge Campground to increase park revenue and alleviate overcrowding. Proposed developments include: the addition of 15 to 23 double-occupancy and five to seven single-occupancy graveled campsites, large group facilities, gravel access roads, two vault latrines, electrical hook-ups, a well for irrigation, enlargement of the existing host pad, and landscaping. In addition, MSP proposes to develop a new non-motorized trail along the north shore of Cooney Reservoir.

1. Would this site development project have an impact on the tourism economy?
NO YES If YES, briefly describe:

Yes, as described, the project has the potential to positively impact the tourism and recreation industry economy if properly maintained. We are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

2. Does this impending improvement alter the quality or quantity of recreation/tourism opportunities and settings?

NO YES If YES, briefly describe:

Yes, as described, the project has the potential to improve quality and quantity of tourism and recreational opportunities if properly maintained. We are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

Signature Carol Crockett, Visitor Services Manager Date May 1, 2012